DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 525 CS 211 495

AUTHOR Aronowitz, Beverly-Lynne
TITLE Women's Fiction and Popular Romance: Student Audience and Teaching Dilemma.
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Literature Conference (3rd, Chicago, IL, October 14-15, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; *Comparative Analysis; *Critical Reading; *Females; Fiction; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; Literary Genres; *Literature Appreciation; Popular Culture; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Romance Novels; *Text Factors

ABSTRACT

In this paper the instructor of a course on contemporary fiction by women about women recounts her experiences with the dissonance that developed between her students and herself during the reading of one of the assigned texts. The instructor explores the reasons underlying the disparate perspectives between two audiences during the act of reading: the instructor who draws on traditional critical insights to understand the aesthetics of literature (along with its inherent ethical and social values), and her students who react affectively and who bring to the literature extraliterary expectations fostered by popular romance formulae. To understand the differences in audience reception, the paper examines three intervals of text from a well-considered contemporary novel and parallel excerpts from a sample of the popular romance genre. The excerpts--the title and introductory paragraph, a prelude to sex, and the sexual encounter--are analyzed in the paper to discern similarities and differences in authorial intent or design, control of language, narrative technique, character delineation, and manipulation of the reader's empathy and point of view. The instructor also considers how best to provide students with critical reading skills so that they might begin to appreciate through traditional means non-traditional but worthy examples of literature which speak to shared human concerns. (One appendix containing questions to facilitate group discussion is attached.) (MS)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Beverly Aronowitz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED298525

March 25, 1987

Beverly-Lynne Aronowitz
Monmouth College
P.O. Box 12
Asbury Park, N.J. 07712

PAPER TITLE: Women's Fiction and Popular Romance: Student Audience and Teaching Dilemma.

ABSTRACT:

During the teaching of a course on contemporary fiction by women about women, dissonance in reading of and receptivity to the text became apparent. This instructor explores the reasons underlying the disparate perspectives between two audiences during the act of reading: the instructor who draws on traditional critical insights to understand the aesthetics of literature as well as the inherent ethical, social values and her students who react affectively, merely, and who bring to the literature extraliterary expectations fostered by popular romance formulae.

To understand the differences in audience reception, three parallel intervals of text are examined, respectively: excerpts from a well-considered contemporary novel included on the course syllabus and parallel excerpts from a sample of the popular romance genre, the leisure-time reading for many students. The excerpts are read with special attention to authorial intent and structural elements which comprise the design of the whole and support intent. In addition, this instructor considers how best to provide students with critical reading skills so that they might begin to appreciate through traditional means non-traditional but worthy examples of literature which speak to shared human concerns.

CS211495



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Recent articles in College English propose to bring exemplary works of popular fiction into the classroom: William W. Stowe, "Popular Fiction as Liberal Art" and Nicholas Coles, "Democratizing Literature," (November, 1986). Certainly to expand works to be studied beyond the tradition seems entirely appropriate, refreshing even, in light of our newly-arriving and ever-increasing number of non-traditional students. We need to select literature to involve and interest students of a practical, technical bent of mind; we need to introduce the idea of literature not only as art and pleasure but also as meaningful to our students' daily lives.

Toward this purpose, in a recent experience to offer a course in popular fiction in our college's recently established women's studies program, "Literature By Women About Women: The New Classics," care was taken to offer works of high literary merit, works new to the scene or new to critical attention; rediscovered voices from past decades of the twentieth century and fresh, experimental voices of the eighties. The class consisted of ten students, among them women of several races and cultures, their ages spanning the years twenty to sixty. And one male joined us too. Four of the group were employed full time, the rest undergraduates full time. Thus, students brought to our shared endeavor unique reactions based on individual social experiences; our readings became resonant with a variety of perspectives.

A pedagogical dilemma, however, quickly arose precipitated by one student's reaction to Louise Shivers' acclaimed first novel Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail (N.Y.: Fawcett Crest, 1983). The outspoken student, a returning adult, challanged: "Why this is nothing but a Harlequin romance!" dismissing the novel in one sweeping statement. Subsequent

discussion revealed that this student's reading repertory for leisure time consisted of the popular romance genre so readily available in drugstores and supermarkets or by subscription; paperbacks distributed, for example, by Harlequin Enterprises, Canada; Simon and Schuster's Silhouette Books or Dell's "Candlelight Series." (Janice A. Radway. Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature. Chapter 1, "The Institutional Matrix: Publishing Romantic Fiction," Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 19-45). I reasoned that the sole criteria for the student's outburst against the Shivers' novel came from her reliance on critical standards exclusive to popular romance. Readers of romance, who are at once consumers, therefore critics, discern "good" romances from "bad" or unreadable ones: the criteria for judgment is based on consensual validation by the reading audience. Especially important for readers' positive reception are formulaic devices, not necessarily apparent to the romance readers, which fulfill expectations that the heroine, after a certain amount of bearable obstacle and pain, will turn a cruel or uncaring, enigmatic hero into a loving marriage mate. Endings are always happy; the future is always bright. This formula gives true pleasure to readers, a genuine feeling of hope and optimism. On these affective, audience-centered grounds is the romance deemed "ideal" or "failed." (Radway. Chapter 4, "The Ideal Romance: The Promise of Patriarchy," 119-156, see especially 123, 126, 128-129, 131, 133-134, 143, 147; Chapter 5. "The Failed Romance: Too Close to the Problems of Patriarchy, " 159; Chapter 2, "The Readers and Their Romances," 55, 61-62, 64-65).

In contrast, we readers of literature base our critiques on the text,

and our judgment is informed by the traditional considerations of language, narrative technique and design. And, if the effect on the reader is discomfort or pain or pessimism, we do not reject these qualities, but rather, we question the calculated intent of the author to so dramatically illuminate the design. The student's stronger voice of protest was not anomalous but representative of the class consensus that the Shivers' novel was not only low-minded but unpleasant. Clearly, dissonance of critical perspective and esthetic taste was apparent between the instructor's and the students' divergent approaches to reading texts. Although students in this class had experienced life, witnessing depictions of life in literature--especially negative depictions--was unsettling and disturbing. In addition, neither life experience nor previous contact with the many readily available forms of popular culture could offer insight and the means to appreciate works like the Shivers' novel, contemporary fiction by women, selected for innovation and excellence of style, as well as for their explicit statement about human values, issues of concern to women and men, too. Each of us had justified reasons to support our disparate points of view: their readings had been validated by the consensus of popular taste, mine by the consensus of academic tradition. Exacerbating our distance, too, was the ambiguous message of Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail which shares plot characteristics with the popular romance, mainly motifs of sex and intrigue. But I felt our dissonance should be resolved but through means consonant with the traditions: my students would need to give up some former naive perceptions for new insightful ones, in this case, learning to apply a new set of critical criteria to a new experience of reading. This instructor was compelled to rethink not only how she might enable students to discern

subtleties of the literary form but also how she might enable them to explore more deeply the import of contemporary literature by women. Redirecting these students' purposes to read would have to be explored. For instance, readers of popular romance express their need to "escape" the tensions of caretaking responsibilities of family and home (Radway 66). Light reading offers vicarious pleasure and provides a private space for indulgence of self alone. (Radway. Reading the Romance 66; Radway, "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading," Daedalus, 113:3 (Summer, 1984), 49-73, see especially 62-68). In contrast, readers of popular fiction such as the Shivers' example are involved deeply and sometimes painfully in concerns that romance readers might wish to escape. For instance, the central issue of the Shivers' novel is the feminist concern, if not the broadly human concern, about the uses and abuses of sexuality. Briefly, here is the plot summary and thematic design of Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail.

Shivers sets her novel, so rich in metaphor and regional detail, in her native North Carolina, tobacco-growing country in 1937. Roxy, the central character, is bound to her husband Aaron through the circumstance, at first, of not realizing life offered choices, then bound as wife and mother by moral stricture and social convention. Roxy contacts others solely through her sexuality: When she first met Aaron "[letting] it start up between [them]" filled wells of loneliness and isolation, for a short time ast least (Shivers 15). But sex entrapped Aaron, too, who gave up his future plans to enter agricultural college in order to marry Roxy. The marriage leaves both silent, mechanical, though not unloving, but obligation and loneliness accompany lovemaking. Roxy describes sex as "raising [her] skirt and getting sticky and messed up. . . . After [Aaron] finished, he got up and [she] heard his belt buckle clank . . . . [she] lay there with [her] eyes closed, feeling lonely (15, 16).

Unappeased isolation leads Roxy to Ruffin: Sex is their only contact, and sex with Ruffin becomes Roxy's bondage, her addiction. These are the limited terms in which she prescribes her life, and in just these terms, Roxy will be used by others.

Shivers' narrative strategy is Roxy's trial of telling about her self-initiated encounters with Ruffin and her final release. On the surface, the plot seems to follow the intrigue formula of the romance genre: Ruffin's murder of Aaron, unknown to Roxy; Ruffin's escape with Roxy (his kidnapping of her); Roxy's return and trial amid the support and understanding of the community. The crucial difference, however, between novel and romance is one of intent: Roxy begins to realize, even if just a glimmer, new ways to contact life and be contacted and fulfilled in return. The Shivers' novel speaks to the liberation both of male and female through choice, option. It speaks to the healing of spiritual wounds in relationships, of the coming together of male and female as equal partners to create for both productive and meaningful lives.

"Nothing but a Harlequin romance!" rang in this instructor's ears, a call to action. To argue against this student's indictment of the novel in a convincing way would take some research. At the time, I had never read a popular romance, but my intuitions led me to recall the TV soaps I was addicted to in the sixties or the tamer radio soaps of the forties, the nostalgic memory of The Romance of Helen Trent or Our Gal Sunday. Happily, I came upon Harlequins stocked at a local supermarket in an affluent, central New Jersey seacoast town (The Foodtown at Sea Girt). At the time I wondered if these paperbacks were the literary diet and killers of time for teenagers and housewives.

Subsequent reading of Radway's study confirmed my intuitions: the number of romance readers is considerable, "16 million women in North America alone." (Radway cites a 1980 Harlequin publicity realease. Reading The Romance, 40 and "Notes," 247). Perusing the ample display of books in the supermarket, I finally settled upon Rosemary Carter's Impetuous Marriage from the erotic "Harlequin Presents" series (November, 1985) because the back cover blurb about plot seemed to follow the gist somewhat of the Shivers' plot. Subsequent reading of Radway confirmed that reliance on the back cover blurbs for book selection replicates the selection method of romance readers. Crucial is the reliability of descriptive copy, illustrations and title. If plots do not conform to expections elicited by cover formats, readers will angrily discard their selections. (Reading The Romance 162, 49-50). Then, too, coming upon Harlequins in the supermarket was not the chance find I'd thought, for each month "'more than 100,000 supermarkets, variety stores, and drugstores'" receive twelve Harlequins, six with "'standard'" plots and six with "'more sexually explicit'" plots, the "Harlequin Presents" series from which I had make selection. (Radway cites Ray Walters, "Paperback Talk," New York Times Book Review, 24 February 1980, 47, Reading The Romance,41). Little did I know, however, that my quest for a romance selection might have led me just two blocks away to my hometown library, a very traditional repository. In spite of a continuing polemic among town libraries to stock this non-traditional reading fare, the public library director in my town has been ordering popular romances for an avid and demanding local readership since 1971. Harlequins are the most widely circulated, and, at present, the library owns approximately 1700 hardcover Harlequins (First editions, Mills and Boon, Ltd., Canada) which occupy one corner of the library's shelves,

prominent in their attractive pastels. The library owns other romance series, but they are included in the general fiction. (Interview with Robert Stewart, Director, Asbury Park Public Library [New Jersey], December 23, 1986).

My selection completed, I formulated a plan to compare the Shivers' novel with the Carter romance to try to understand what aspects common to both samples led my student to equate them. The limits of my task would be to compare three sequences of plot common to both romance and novel--the title and introductory paragraph; a prelude scene to sex; the sexual encounter-- to discern similarities and differences with special attention to authorial intent or design, control of language, narrative technique, character delineation, and manipulation of the reader's empathy and point of view. In addition, I would begin to consider how I might initiate and encourage students' critical sensitivities to the aspects I've defined. I would need to devise collaborative workshop tasks to engage students in a method of evaluation similar to the method I would employ. An effective workshop task would enable students to arrive at independent critical statements to be shared and discussed among them in small groups. A clearly defined workshop task would provide students with guided learning to enable them to arrive at some of the same observations I had made and will now present in the succeeding discussion.

The title and introductory paragraphs. The promise of the title Impetuous Marriage is fulfilled immediately in the opening lines. If the reader chose the novel based on these expectations, she has not wasted her money. A dialogue format draws us into the initial scene:

'Allison's eloped.'

Tracy Galland gripped the telephone tightly with one hand while with the other she pushed a thick swathe of honey-colored hair from her puckered forehead.

'I don't believe you're serious.'

'It's true, I tell you. Tracy, you have to stop them.'

Her mother was serious, Tracy decided, catching the sincerity in the panic-stricken tone. What had her young sister been up to this time?

'You have to go after them!' Lucille Galland said again (Carter 5).

These lines formulate the plot: Tracy will search for her sister at her mother's request. What surprizes, what dangers, what romance will our heroine encounter along the way? An omniscient narrator focused on Tracy's point of view will answer our questions with a straightforward, linear plot, incident marching upon incident to surprize, tintilate and finally to satisfy. Readers' expections, however, do not grow out of the experience of reading; rather, expectations are extraliterary, inherent in the readers while the romance author and editor, the expert purveyors of pop culture, serve up to audience demands.

The romance heroine fulfills the formula to be likeable so as to capture our sympathy when the going gets naughty, that is when the love relationship reaches a higher pitch. The "ideal" romance allows the reader to identify wholely with the heroine and allows the reader to feel the effects of the developing relationship from the initial,

temporary setbacks and disappointments to the ultimate triumph to win over the man as a loving, caring partner. (Radway, Reading The Romance, Chapter 2, "The Readers and Their Romances," 2, 5, 9, 64, 70). According to formula, Tracy is pretty ("thick swathe of honey-colored hair") and "although [she is] beautiful, [she is] never vain, nor [does she] preen in an effort to attract a man." (Radway, Reading The Romance, Chapter 4, 126). Tracy is sympathetic to her mother's plight, for she "puckers" her good-girl forehead with sympathetic worry. And there is promise of adventure ("What had her younger sister been up to this time?"). Here depicted are more ideal characteristics: Tracy is "strong," "fiery." The adventure she undertakes will reveal her "intelligence, sense of humor, and independence." (Radway, Reading The Romance, Chapter 2, 54, 77).

These initial lines formulate the romance writer's sole technique for evoking character and situation--a facile saying or naming, merely. We are not drawn into the writing as sharers in mood; instead, we stand outside and observe through the telling: Tracy is tense ("grips the phone tightly"), but we don't in the least feel her tension. The mother is named as "sincere," "panic-stricken," but we don't in the least feel the panic. This naming strategy will reach its full potential of seeming inadequacy in the several sexual interludes, seemingly the raison d'etre of the romance format: "sensual," "sexual," "sexy," "arouse," "roused," "hard body," "soft body" are plentifully sprinkled throughout as the exclusive erotic vocabulary with little eroticism beneath as support. To one who reads texts as literature this writing seems incompetent. Actually, within the limits of the romance genre,

the formulaic, generalized, repetitive vocabulary is quite competent; words in repetition are cues to produce vicarious pleasure for the reader. (Radway, Reading The Romance, Chapter 6, "Language and Narrative Discourse," 189, 195-198). Radway parallels the reader's pleasure to that derived from "myths of oral cultures" (198). Pleasure comes when the myth satisfies expectation.

Let's consider the initial paragraphs of Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail. Well, the title--rather puzzling. We don't know who is "here" to get which "baby." Sounding twangy, country-western, lowdown, the title's promise is not fulfilled in the initial paragraph. Evoked, unexpectedly, is a funeral home.

> Red-headed, jagged-faced Jack Ruffin, his long arms dangling by his side, walked into Tarborough one bleak-edged day near the end of last February this same year, 1937. He stepped up onto the wide porch of the funeral home as deliberately as a casket salesman (Shivers 1).

"Red-headed" is made special through italics, for we will soon learn that the secret observer of Jack Ruffin that day was Roxy, our heroine. For her, red hair was startling, never seen in that small North Carolina town where not many strangers came to settle and breed new traits into local stock. For her, the redness offered a premonition of welcomed contrast to that gray day, of something expectant, different, on that day so like other days of sameness; deprived, stagnant days of that economic depression of the thirties. Roxy confesses:

> I never told anybody, but I was sitting out behind the funeral home that day when Jack Ruffin walked up. I was waiting there in the car for my husband, Aaron, like he told me to, when I saw this man walking from the direction of the train station: Something about the color of his hair on that gray day and the way he walked gave me a strange feeling right from the first minute I saw him at a distance. (2)

In contrast to the prominent, "spunky" heroine of the romance (Carter 71), Roxy is a shadowy observer. We will surmise her beauty only by the shy reactions of the men who surround her. The motif of secrecy, of acts hidden so appropriate to the adultery are given first expression in the initial lines ("never have told anybody"). Roxy is not a source of emulation: her grammar at times is incorrect, and she is as submissive as the household dog ("waiting there. . .like [Aaron] told me to "). Roxy will continue to tell her history--she and Jack and Aaron--but through the telling and along with Roxy, quite in contrast to the experience of reading a romance, the reader will make felt discoveries and realizations about life which transcend the mere telling of a love triangle. In contrast to the romance, the expressive language of the Shivers' novel supports the mood of situation and setting and hints of dreadful things to come. Hear the rough whisper of Ruffin's name. Note the terminal, deathly images evoked by the poetic diction: "one bleak-edged day near the end of last February (italics added)"; note the evocation of the now-mythic Depression era of the 1930's reinforced by images of a funeral home and by Jack equated with a casket salesman. No, this is not the stuff of a Harlequin romance, not "romantic" at all. Instead, these

are the perversities of real lives lived.

Examination of the two works so far reveals disparity rather than similarity. How could the student equate one work for another? Perhaps, the striking motif of sexual encounter needs to be examined more closely. The next set of excerpts from romance and novel, respectively, depicts the first moments of contact between soon-to-be lovers.

Prelude Scenes. The handsome male of Impetuous Marriage ("lean and tanned and rugged" [15]), focuses attention on Tracy:

> 'You got burnt today, he said after a while . . . .'
> 'Through the sun-tan oil?'
> 'There were parts you neglected. . . .'
>
> She saw the gleam in his eyes, and wondered what outrageous remark was forthcoming. But no words crossed his lips. Instead he leaned forward, and then she felt the tip of a tongue in the hollow at the base of her throat.
>
> The action was so unexpected, and so devastatingly sensuous, that something exploded inside her, and within moments her body was aflame with desire (Carter 47,48).

And here is the first overt expression of lust in Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail :

> He stuck his nicotined fingers out and pressed them against my lips, pushing the flesh against my teeth and said laughing that laugh, "Who cut you on, who cut your motor on?" (Shivers 39).

* * * *

> Sometimes Jack would bend over me at the table his mouth almost touching me. I felt seized . . . . Something is about to happen to me. It's getting closer and closer. But we still kept words straight and commonplace (Shivers, 51).

* * * *

> Dear God, I must die from the sickness of wanting wanting. . . . I must die, there is no way of holding back (Shivers, 57).

These parallel excerpts from romance and novel, respectively, reveal shared commonalities yet subtle differences. In the Shivers' novel, the motifs of violence ("flesh" against "teeth"), the grotesque ("nicotined fingers") and secrecy ("still kept words straight") establish a complex quality of mood. Roxy's sexual excitement, which she tries to hide from Jack is only too apparent to him. He finds her out, shames her when he identifies her running motor "cut on" by him. She is the

source of his amusement, his scorn and his lust.

Roxy feels shame at this encounter similar to the feelings associated with her first menstruation, her passage into womanhood: "I felt the old feeling of shame wash over me. All the old sick feeling . . . the day I got what I called the dread " (Shivers 37).

It is perverse rather than healthy feeling which draws Roxy to Jack: she is obsessed, addicted; she is unwilling to succumb, here pleading to be stronger, in control of herself and her destiny. "Something is about to happen to me " (51). Yet she is helpless to take action. The aggressive male and submissive female, roles defined by a male-dominated society, Radway's "patriarchy," are evident in both scenes of romance and novel, serving, perhaps, to mislead an innocent reader. In addition, a subtlety of the author's craft might be easily overlooked: the images evoked are perverse and unpleasant, but believable. The writing causes us to view this love scene from a negative, disapproving stance: this is not the loving manner lovers should assume, yet we know too well that lovers are often unloving. The student missed the diction which would have clued her into the author's meaning and design.

In contrast, the Harlequin romance passage is meant to be attractive. Depicted is an "escape" motif with the heroine as the center of loving attention. In the Carter romance, the lovers' rendezvous is set at a candle-lit dinner on an isolated, richly appointed estate. The soon-to-be lovers have shared a day of sunshine and sailing. The details depicted mean to invite approval from the reader, not disdain. That approval is meant to extend to the sexual invitation. The male

makes his move; he is benignly aggressive. The act is contrived, for the author gives no preparation, emotional or psychological. The act is contrite, just a bit of tintilation which fails to tintilate owing to a paucity of craft. That the heroine is aroused is named, merely, in adolescent hyperbole ("devastatingly sensuous" and "aflame with desire"). Ironically, in spite of its nastiness, to this reader, Jack's encounter with Roxy is more seductive because we participate in the lustful feeling but think we shouldn't. And that is exactly the conflicting position of emotional push and pull in which Shivers wishes to place her reader. We empathize in a dramatic way with Roxy.

Depiction of a prelude scene to sex which plays out stereotyped roles of male and female is common to both romance and novel. But, each author's motives to manipulate the stereotype and, further, each author's attempt to manipulate the reader's attitude toward the stereotype is widely divergent. The Shivers' novel explores the complexities of sexuality: how a woman's need for self-esteem and contact with others and with a life larger than her own, how these needs may be acted out sexually, a personally destructive choice; destructive because such behavior is ultimately unsatisfying, supports the cycle of loneliness and lack of deep personal fulfillment, thereby intensifying the addictive behavior. Roxy can be placed among a long list of heroines in the literary canon whose sexual feelings are calls for clarity and meaning to their lives: Sister Carrie, Blanche DuBois, Emma Bovary, for example.

The intent of the Shivers' novel is a revision of male-dominated ("patriarchal") control of sex roles towards self-validation and liberation for female and male, both; but the remedy is painful, for

the idea of separate self in the novel is placed outside the tradition of marriage not in relation to marriage. In contrast, the popular romance at once reinforces and claims our approval of sex roles defined by the patriarchy. It is Radway's point that readers of romance cannot withstand too great a challange to the socially sanctioned pattern of their lives. After all, their reading concluded, they must return to the real demands and pressures of family life. It is through the act of reading that the women interviewed by Radway challange male dominance and control: For a short time they identify with an independent, feminine heroine who is the victor over a formerly threatening but attractive male, socializing him, even making him "maternal," that is caring and sensitive, able to administer to all of the heroine's needs. (Radway, Reading The Romance. Chapter 4. "The Ideal Romance," 124, 129, 135-139; Radway, "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice," Communications, Vol. 9, 1986, pp. 93-123) . Thus, these readers' needs are satisfied vicariously, temporarily; but nothing is changed. "Reading thus leads only to other romance reading." (Radway, "Identifying Ideological Seams," 114).

Rather than to be instructed by the Shivers' novel, readers of romance would assign Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail to "the garbage dump" (Radway, Reading The Romance, 77). The Shivers' novel by romance standards fails in every critical consideration. The heroine is not enviable, her adultery repugnant. The plot centers on an objectionable one woman-two men pattern; the husband is indifferent, the lover brutal. The consumation of the plot offers separation from the patriarchal model not affirmation ; the resolution offers solitary independence not union in a happy marriage. (Radway, Reading The Romance. Chapter 5. "The Failed Romance." 165-171). Using such criteria, the outspoken student most likely rejected the Shivers' novel; she did not do

so intellectually but affectively, for it is solely the affective mechanism in romance readers which is addressed and which motivates them to read. Affective use of language is common to both romance and novel, the former formulaic,the latter metaphoric but each with disparate authorial intent. In the final sequences, the sexual encounter, these similarities,yet differences are notable. Notable too is the commonality of plot and role playing but, again, with disparate purpose.

The encounter: Prelude scenes to sex in both novel and romance lead to the consumate moment; we are witness, also, to how each author's crafting of language creates intent. The encounter in the Shivers' novel is made of metaphor; acts are not named. The encounter in the romance relies on cliche to such an extent that erotic scenes seem guilty of self-mockery. Here's an example of unintentional bathos to a reader of literature but satisfying formula to a romance reader. There are several steamy sequences in Impetuous Marriage accompanied by the motif of water--swirling, rushing--to prefigure, I suppose, that long-awaited, orgasmic moment so reminiscent of the cinema of the forties when a modest camera turned from the lovers to rushing waterfalls, erupting fireplaces. Here is a typical interlude in a swimming pool:

> As his kisses grew even more demanding, Tracy's body was filled with an excitement that was almost unbearable. Every inch of her body seemed to be in contact with him now, her bare thighs against his, her breasts pushed hard against his chest, her feet clinging to his legs because she was out of her depth, her softness moulding (sic) itself to his hard planes and angles. Around them the water swirled with their movements, making for

> a sensuousness that made her head spin and
> her senses melt, so that there was little
> she could have denied him (Carter 76).

Suddenly, Tracy manages to gain control of herself:

> 'Ryan, no!' she protested.
> 'Yes, Tracy ' (Carter 48).

Established here is that Tracy is passionate, no prude, but ever prudent to keep her virginity in tact as all self-respecting girls should. In each of the scenes, just at the moment of consumation, Tracy pulls away. And the male is forgiveably upset:

> 'You little hell-cat!' There was
> cruel authority in the tone (Carter 53).

These encounter scenes play out a genteel sado-masochistic game. But these scenes of invitation then rejection teach ways to widen the gender gap and foster misunderstanding and alienation between male and female and on the very occasion that male and female are meant to be the closest, the most united. The romance author means us to admire Tracy for "saving [herself] for marriage " (Carter 51). A cynical reader might well chuckle at this grandmotherly affirmation of chastity. But we feel more sympathetic to the inclusion of this cliche in the romance plot when Radway explains that romance readers value virginity less on moral grounds than for very practical reasons: "[A] woman must protect herself from the many men who desire her body and care little for her needs." Sex is "exchanged for love and used only in its service." (Radway. Reading The Romance. Chapter 4, 126).

The central challange for the heroine in the romance plot to manipulate the hero to propose marriage, when considered in the light of Radway's discussion, is a profound expression of concern to seek protection and alleviate threat: Love, sex and marriage , if united, create the ideally safe life. But somehow the real urgency for love and protection becomes lost or underplayed in the flux of a superficial romance plot. The romance author of Impetuous Marriage contrives the moment of proposal to marry in a shower, the heroine quite nude but all soaped up, her man fully clothed.

> . . . they closed the gap that separated them. He did not have to draw her to him, it was a mutual coming together. Tracy ached to be near him, and the hardness of his body was evidence that he wanted her too (Carter 87).

Notice the modest language and general description: "Their love-making had never been more erotic, nor more tender"(Carter 87). This is exactly the language formula acceptable to romance readers who, although delighting in erotic scenes, would be "disgusted" by the explicit language and detailed descriptions common to male porrography. (Radway. Reading The Romance. Chapter 2, 66; Chapter 4, 164-165; 170-171).

Ah, but finally, when our heroine, poor girl, is about to succumb, her man pushes her away!

> 'I want you to marry me' (Carter 88).
>
> '(Y)ou're not ready for it. No. It's marriage for you' (89).

For the romance reader, here is the long-awaited moment when the male becomes socialized by the female; he is so protective of her needs that he denies his urgency--and hers too--for her best interests. This scene enacted is the raison d'etre of the romance form. The heroine has triumphed (Radway. Reading The Romance. Chapter 2, 70). Paradoxically, patriarchal values and sanctions have triumphed, too, because the heroine is victorious within very narrowlimits (limits she is unaware of): The heroine achieves "her greatest success. . . when she secures the attention and recognition of her culture's most powerful and essential representative, a man" (Radway, Reading The Romance. Chapter 2, 84). "So what! " we say. There must be other worthy values in our lives to strive for.

To the reader of literature, one who is informed by traditional standards, this scene comes close to farce, though unintentionally, of course. The marriage proposal scene in the romance seems to satirize all the cliches women have been taught to prize, all the false expectations women have been taught to await, passively. But, in truth, the scene has seriousness of intent and is taken seriously by its reading audience who experiences very real satisfactions of optimisim and well-being (Radway, 70). So satiated, this reading audience could well overlook or be unknowing of the scene's silly role play without attempt on the author's part to portray and explore shared human values and concerns of a very real nature common to both sexes. Virginity and marriage are reinforced solely to create female dependence. New options for men and women in relation, outside of marriage--meaningful friendships or shared careers--are denied through simple omission, through concentration on one motif.

After her interviews with readers of romances for her 1984 study, Radway developed friendship and respect for the women she came to know, and, more recently,in a 1986 article, this scholar expressed a troubled attitude towards women's addiction to the reading of romances. Reading romances becomes a major activity in the lives of devoted readers, yet the activity has little impact to change women's lives in constructive ways. Radway writes: "[R]eading only temporarily transforms patriarchal social relations . . . . [D]iscontent need not simply be endured or coped with but might be significantly altered, if not erased altogether" (Radway, "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice," Communications, Vol. 9, 1986, pp. 93-123). In her recent article, Radway states that she would like to "create a space for intervention, for political action" between "the seam," that is between the space or place of discrepancy in readers' satisfaction to maintain their pattern of living because of the reading of romances and their dissatisfaction with their pattern of living in spite of the reading of romances. Radway states: "We might. . . begin the process of persuading these women to occupy a feminist ground. . . . [W]hat we might get them to see is precisely what conditions in their own lives romances address, why they do it only temporarily, and perhaps most important, what would have to be changed in the real world if the fantasy of the romance was to be made real, that is, the social construction of masculinity itself ("Identifying Ideolgical Seams," 114).

The preceding discussion of the "encounter scene" in the romance genre has disclosed that beyond its purpose to satisfy readers' expectations, there remains the unaddressed problem that readers experience no benefits nor insights nor visions for significant life changes. Yet,

significant themes of the need for insight and change are addressed in the Louise Shivers' novel, albeit on the surface the textual air is heavy with patriarchal patterns. The encounter scene in the Shivers' novel tunes us in to the new but welcomed strain of poetic language; and soon to be discovered, too, is quite a different intent on the part of this author from that of a romance author. In the encounter scene of Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail, Roxy and Jack share sexual union depicted solely through metaphor, image flowing upon image, of fruits and flowers, of colors, of fragrances, of textures:

> He took hold of my hand, and we moved to the shade of the shed. There was no thought of going inside the house or any other hiding place. The tobacco fields were fences. We lay down together in the fragrant dirt of the flower bed. Cotton clothes were no matter; an overflowing gourd dipper was tilted to the angle for him to drink. Our motions were like the unrollings of a Persian rug of many colors. Our tongues were the tenderest chameleons of spring. He put himself high up inside me as naturally as a silver shoehorn easing a silk slipper (Shivers 58).

No, the author is not seducing us into condoning adultery, but she is depicting Roxy's pleasure and growing addiction most expressively. And all summer of that affair, Roxy "quiet as velvet" (61), "slip[s] down to the barn" (62) to be with Jack, while the radio played:

I will pawn you my watch
I will pawn you my chain
I will pawn you my gold wedding ring,
Oh, warden, you know I want my baby
out of jail (60).

It will take a trail of destructive, ugly acts for Roxy to realize she is jailed by her obsessive longings. Roxy's past was deprived of family love and protection. To find that worth and protection she traps herself and Aaron into a premature marriage; then, again, during her marriage, her sense of worthlessness is challenged by Ruffin's brutal yet compelling admiration. Roxy voices her addictive feelings, yet she can do nothing; not to notice Jack Ruffin "was like trying not to look into a fireplace when a fire was crackling" (23-24). The contact between them is silent, boldly physical, destructive. But, it is Roxy's only learned mode of assertion, her sole way to feel self worth. Sexual union with Ruffin must be played out. The reader feels this urgency, too. Shivers establishes a rightness or action in a wrongness of context.

But, finally, through the kindness of her family and neighbors who (because of Jack Ruffin's grotesque murder of Aaron) notice Roxy for the first time as one in need of care and help, Roxy will find the strength and resource to release herself from her imprisonment. Her assertive step-mother sums up the problem: [T]hat's half her trouble now, listening to nothing but ghost stories all her life and always doing something some man thought she ought to do. . . . She needs

to learn how to do some things first. Some civilized things. That's the other half of her problem" (146).

Here plain, country-fashion common sense is directly expressed: women need to be released from the myths which have "jailed" them to their sex and sexuality; they need to learn independence, especially of men; they need to find meaningful work. And so the Shivers' novel ends on a practical and right note.

On the surface, both romance and novel share a common element: sexual encounter hot and heavy. But the crucial element, each author's overall design supported by language and narrative technique and each author's intent distinguish a fine literary work with a serious feminist and humanist message, the Shivers' novel, from pure pulp, the Harlequin romance, which is dressed up in ladylike language but is too cowardly to undress as pornography. In thinking about the initial challange from my student which voiced the class consensus, she seemed to question the aesthetic validity of the Shivers' novel based on a limited experience of reading romances. By noting the gross commonality between novel and romance, sex, the student denied the literary merits of the novel. She allowed one broad brush stroke, one glaring color shared by each form to obfuscate the rich and rare subtelties exclusive to the novel. More to the point, this student had no critical, aesthetic measuring sticks enabling her to discern the merits of one work above another. One measuring stick is an author's depiction of authentic place through detail of setting. Readers of romance assert that setting is important to them, not only to provide "'escape'" but also to provide "'facts'" and "'truths'" (Radway, Reading The

Romance. Chapter 3. "The Act of Reading The Romance," 107). Romance readers also claim they read "' to learn about faraway places and times.'" (107). Outside of sexual themes, a critical touchstone to distinguish the merits of one work above another is treatment of place or setting. The Shivers' novel is a fine example of an author's ability to vividly depict an authentic and believable sense of time and place. In a sweep ofpoetry as wide as the front porch of that funeral home evoked that day in 1937, Shivers immerses her readers in a setting rich in historic and regional context. The love triangle in the foreground, a coherent, consistent background is ever present. As the plot evolves, readers witness a full tobacco-growing year from planting and ripening to harvesting and barning to curing. "The smell of the town, heavy with the sweetness of thousands of pounds of cured tobacco. . ." (Shivers, 88). We overhear bits of the only talk in town--the price of tobacco, and we listen to the auctioneers in warehouses: "Bid'er up. . ." (84). "Do I hear a five, a five, a five?" (85). (Recollected for this reader is the auctioneer's chant of the Lucky Strike cigarette commercial on the radio of the forties.) And, finally, at the tobacco season's end, the whole town, including Roxy in a new, store-bought dress, turns out for "The Tobacco Pageant" and "the crowning of the tobacco princess " (92-93).

Although the audience of popular romance considers setting important, especially exotic or historical setting, the sample romance I selected does little to establish scene but for a superficial delineation, mainly because the writing is limited by the constraints of its formula. For example, the reader is quite taken with surprize

when four pages into the reading of the Carter romance, the heroine is revealed as walking on "[t]he streets of Durban" (8). Are we really in the Republic of South Africa? we wonder. Later, Tracy makes her way to "Umhlowi: Somewhere on the South Coast. The nearest biggest village. . . Ifafa Beach (10). The scene is casually noted for the reader in a periphery and distant manner: "The undulating sugar-cane covered hills gave way to fruit farms as the train chugged its way Southwards. Mangoes, lychees, bananas and pawpaws begin to be seen with more frequency" (Carter, 13). This romance author uses the merest "aimless glance" to establish setting and to include atmosphere, but the technique adheres to the kind of formula readers expect and are satisfied by. (Radway. Reading The Romance. Chapter 6, "Language and Narrative Discourse, " 195). Even out of the boudoir, romance writing falls short of "the real right thing," that is literature with effective writing and valuable message.

Students need to be provided with critical tools to discern literary art from pure pulp--especially when surface details seem to be similar. "Nothing but a Harlequin romance." The teacher in me interpreted the student's response as a call to help her understand the idea of literature. The woman in me urgently wanted this student to see the socially destructive message imbedded (no pun!) in the romance form. Perhaps this two-fold purpose could be accomplished by providing a small-group, collaborative task centering on my objectives. The workshop I finally devised is informed by Harvey S. Wiener's recent discussion, "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation." CE, 48:1 (January, 1986), 52-61). The task in two parts, the first part drawing on students' own experience, the second concentrating on a limited, key portion of text, has as its objective

to bring students to an awareness of the author's intent by examining language. Final comparison of the groups' experiences of the text should enable them to discover the author's intent, not only for the passage in question, but for the design of the whole work. But further, the objective of this exercise is meant as heuristic, a way to teach a universal, to teach the idea of literature and how creative writers use language implicitly and suggestively to express ideas. (See Appendix). Students need to discover critical insights gradually through guided, "hands-on" learning. Soon, they might begin to include in their private reading repertory more complex works, works which formerly they would have shunned. They might come to prize rather than avoid the bold, innovative styles and statements of the best of our contemporary literature by new, young authors. (For example, The Penguin Contemporary American Fiction Series; Vintage Contemporaries and Vintage Books' AVENTURA, The Library of Contemporary World Literature.) Beyond style and innovation, our new critical readers might begin to discern works which intend social messages: how we might live our lives in meaningful ways; how we might stretch our personal limits so as to contact others in the most constructive ways we are able.

Appendix

Collaborative task for small-group, in-class workshop.

Objective: To discover techniques a writer uses to guide the reader's point of view and to provide clues to understand the design or intent overall.

Text: Louise Shivers. Here To Get My Baby Out of Jail. N.Y.: Fawcett Crest, 1983. 39 - 41.

Part One of Workshop Task: Divided into groups of three or four, students discuss their perceptions about a romantic meeting with someone they like very much. Record descriptive words and phrases which evoke the setting; describe the other person; describe the feelings evoked by the scene.

After the list is compiled, the groups evaluate words and phrases and descriptions: Are responses mostly positive? Are there some negative aspects? Write a short collaborative statement reporting on evaluation.

Groups reconvene as a whole group and report their findings; the imagined scenes, this instructor suspects, would be positive--resembling, in fact, the mood and language of a Harlequin romance. What is established here is students' articulation of received ideas and popular expectations about romance. In part two of this task, students will examine a key portion of text and in plenary session compare received ideas with the more complex ideas offered by the text.

Part Two of Workshop Task: Examine the text (Shivers, 39-41). List unusual or striking words, phrases, actions. Evaluate items listed.

Appendix

Are responses mostly positive? or negative?

In plenary session: What feelings (negative, positive) dominate the Shivers' passage? What words, phrases, actions contribute to the overall tone? How does the Shivers' passage differ from your imagined romantic scene? Are there aspects of the Shivers' passage which match your imagined romantic scene?

Then, with the guidance of the instructor, the group discussion could begin to focus on the intent of the author, her purpose for so constructing the scene which differs from the received idea of romance, and how the scene so constructed provides a key to the meaning of the whole.

## Works Cited

Carter, Rosemary. Impetuous Marriage. Ontario: Harlequin Enterprises, Ltd., November, 1985.

Coles, Nicholas. "Democratizing Literature." College English. 48:7 (November, 1986), 664-680.

Radway, Janice A. Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

_____. "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading." Daedalus, 113:3 (Summer, 1984), 49-73.

_____. "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice. Communications, Vol. 9, 1986, pp. 93-123.

Shivers, Louise. Here To Get My Baby Out Of Jail. N.Y.: Fawcett Crest, 1983.

Stowe, William W. "Popular Fiction As Liberal Art." College English, 48:7 (November, 1986), 646-663.

Wiener, Harvey S. "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation." College English, 48:1 (January, 1986), 52-61.